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"DE LOS' ELL AN' YARD."

Fer de los' ell an' yard is a huntin' fer de mornin',
En she 'll ketch up widdus fo' we ever git dis corn in.

Refrain of a corn-shucking song in *Uncle Remus*.

THE expression "de ell an' yard," as used in the quotation given above, has been pronounced by Southerners and writers of negro dialect "genuine negro" for the sword and belt of Orion. Such verdicts have too long been accepted as final for certain words and sayings in the folk-lore of our Southern negro.

Unfortunately for the folk-lorist, as well as for the philologist and ethnologist, little attention has been paid to the study of our negro American dialects, or to the influences attending their formation. The first serious approach to this study reveals the fact that much which passes for genuine negro in speech, custom, and superstition, was Court English at the time of the separation of our colonies from the mother country.

I have endeavored in a paper now in press to show the importance of the study of these dialects, and the influences attending their formation as causes and effects, believing that through the conservatism of our Southern negro may be traced missing links that have their value in the study of the history of the human race. Not only does this study aim to prove that the majority of words, expressions, and superstitions claiming to be "genuine negro" are survivals with an English parentage, but in many instances it shows a background with a perspective leading into a far distant past. We are also indebted to this same conservatism for an immense amount of material in its purest and most primitive form, a matter of incalculable value to the student of folk-lore.

Just why our American negro should be more conservative than his African brother is a matter of conjecture, though there seem to be various possible causes; that it is so, seems to be indicated by facts, the negro in southern Africa being more conservative than his more northern brother.

We have an instance of this in the familiar "Tar Baby" story. If Mr. Jacobs is correct in tracing it back to the Buddhist Birth Tale of "The Demon with the Matted Hair," then our "Uncle Remus" version is purer than any of the others. The version found by Mr. Heli Chatelain in Angola, Africa, shows strong marks of contact with the whites. In this variant not only do animals appear, but men also, and a flavor of European life runs through the whole. In the Louisiana story given by Alcée Fortier, while only animals figure, there are more of them and the whole tale is more elaborate

than that of Uncle Remus. There are various other versions more or less simple, that we might use for comparison had we time. Some of these come to us from southern Africa, an interesting one having just been published by Poultney Bigelow in "Harper's Magazine." As a further example of conservatism, I would like to cite a tale not found on African soil,—the story of the rabbit and the well-buckets. Mr. John McLaren McBryde has traced this story, for the Baltimore Folk-Lore Society, through the various Middle English, Old English, the German and French versions, to the fable of the goat and the fox. Some of these versions are very elaborate, and show interesting instances of the effect of environment. One of them, written in French in the thirteenth century, is a poem of 30,000 lines. Our "Uncle Remus" story is almost identical with that of Caxton, the most primitive of them all.

As interest in these researches is being aroused and their value recognized, certain expressions are being brought forward for discussion, among them the one already quoted, "de ell an' yard," for the sword and belt of Orion. Nor has the interest in it been confined to this country, for in "The Observatory," an astronomical magazine published at Greenwich, England, there was a short article on the subject in the March number for 1895. It referred to the expression as of interest to those engaged in collecting astronomical allusions and references in contemporary literature. It called attention to a Christmas story in the "Pall Mall Budget" in which a plantation song was introduced, and said that the author, "Q," claimed the expression "de los' ell an' yard" to be "genuine negro" for the sword and belt of Orion.

Mr. Thomas P. Harrison, Johns Hopkins University, in an article published in "Modern Language Notes," April, 1893, advances an interesting theory in regard to the origin of the expression, quoting from another volume of Joel Chandler Harris, as follows:—

"It wuz dark, but the stars wuz a shinin', an' Johnny could tell by the ell-an'-yard (the constellation of Orion) that it was nigh midnight."

Mr. Harrison calls his article "The Elnyard," and says: "The idea evolved in 'Elnyard' is made evident by the ancient Swedish term for the belt of Orion (cf. Jamison), that is, Friggerock, 'Freya's Distaff,' which, after the introduction of Christianity, became Mari-rock, Mary's Distaff, in Scotland (cf. Century Dictionary), Our Lady's Ellwand. Thus it seems that the three stars in the belt of Orion appeared to these people as projecting a line an ell in length." He concludes his article by saying that "Mr. Harris is evidently wrong in writing ell-an'-yard; the n is only the Middle English ending as it appears in eln (cf. Century Dictionary) for ell."

Now, while Mr. Harrison's theory is an interesting one, and helps to throw light on the subject, he has confined his researches to the dictionaries. As folk-lorists we must go farther, and, taking up the folk-lore of the constellation, see if we cannot find a more satisfactory explanation.

From time immemorial no constellation in the heavens, not even the Great Bear, has been so noted as Orion. In and around it are some of the most remarkable stars, as well as the most brilliant constellations; so that when Orion is on the meridian all these celestial bodies are displayed in their utmost splendor, and this is visible in turn to all the world, Orion being sometimes above and sometimes below the equator.

It is not surprising, then, to find an immense amount of folk-lore clustered about this part of the heavens, or to find traces of it all over the known world.

Confining ourselves to Orion, we might stop to wonder, with the astronomers quoted by Mr. Andrew Lang, how and when this parallelogram of stars suggested the idea of the "Mighty Hunter," for as such it appears in the various cults, whether represented by the figure of a man or an animal, the latter form being still retained by our American Indians.

The early representations of the constellation on ancient monuments are five straight lines joining the principal stars, by the side of which are the hieroglyphic characters that represent a man, a sword, and belt, etc. In the temple of Denderah the constellation is represented by the figure of a man.

According to some commentators on the Vedas, however, the first conception of the constellation was that of a head, an antelope's head transfixed with an arrow; but these same commentators disagree as to just where the head was situated, and some claim that the whole of the antelope was there, the head being formed of the stars now forming Orion's head, while his shoulders and knees were the four feet of the antelope. The other theory claims that the antelope's head was formed of the stars round the belt of Orion, the belt itself being the arrow that caused the antelope's death. Later we find the arrow becoming the belt of Orion in the Hindu legend of Prajâpati, "The Master of Life," "The God of Sacrifice," "Time," "The Year." Various legends are told of him, one being that, as the Year or Time, he fell in love with and receded towards his daughter Rohini, variously known as the "Dawn," the "Sky," and the star Aldebaran. To punish him for this love, the gods created a monster who shot an arrow through him and destroyed him. Following the arrow through classic literature, we find constant references to it, as for instance when Eos (Aurora, the dawn)

fell in love with Orion and carried him off, and Diana, to appease the anger of the gods, shot him with an arrow.

Again, we are told that Diana herself was in love with him, and that Apollo, angered, induced her to shoot with an arrow at an object in the sea that proved to be the head of Orion, who was swimming. Orion and the arrow flew at once into the heavens, as did Prajâpati and the arrow that slew him. There are other versions dealing with the arrow, which is still found in South America in connection with the constellation.

Among the ancient Jews, comets were known as "burning arrows," and the Talmud teaches that, when one of these "burning arrows" passes through Orion, it will destroy the world.

Classic literature furnishes many accounts of Orion's life, loves, and death, after which he always appears in the heavens as a giant, a mighty hunter; among the Chinese, "The Conqueror." To some he was the post-diluvian hunter, the mighty Nimrod, and is said to have had the power of walking on the water with dry feet. It would be interesting to know if there is any connection between this and the fact that certain phases of the constellation were dreaded by mariners of old.

To the Hebrew who said, "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion," the constellation was known as Kesil, said to come from Chesil, meaning to be inconstant, to stir up; and through the ages unsettled weather, with storms and tempests, was supposed to attend the constellation, causing it, as I have said, to be greatly dreaded by mariners. The loss of the Roman fleet in the first Punic war was attributed to the sailing of the Consuls between the risings of Orion and Sirius, despite the warnings of the pilots; while Eneas accounted for his being cast on the African coast to the fact that "dire Orion roused the sea."

Just when the belt or girdle, the sword, the lion's skin, and the club appeared, it is difficult to say. A Hindu writer,¹ who bases his claim for great antiquity of the Vedas on their references to Orion, suggests that the sacred thread of the Parsees worn round the waist, thus "girding up the loins," is in imitation of Orion's belt or girdle. The Brahmin wears the sacred thread, he claims, as symbolic of Prajâpati's girdle; and, while a novice, the boy who is to become a Brahmin takes part in a ceremony during which he wears about the waist a grass cord knotted three times in front to represent the three stars in Orion's belt. In this rite, known as the "thread ceremony," a stick of the fig-tree is held aloft while the following sacrificial formula is spoken:—

¹ Bâl Gangâdhar Tilak, *The Orion, or Researches into the Antiquity of the Vedas*. Bombay, 1893.

"O wood, be erect, and protect me from sin till the end of this sacrifice!"

Originally the skin of a deer or lion was worn, but now only a small piece tied to a silken thread. Here, then, for the novice who is about to become a Brahmin, a follower of Prajâpati, the first of all the Brahmins, we have the girdle, the skin, and the club of Orion.

There are analogies to the stories of Orion and Prajâpati in the legends of Woden the wild hunter, the god Frey and his stag, and others which we have not time to point out.

While the legends of the constellation, as a whole, are so varied, even more variously picturesque are the names given to the sword and belt. The Parsees have called the belt "the star-bespangled girdle," while the Greenlander sees in it three Greenlanders who have lost their way, and the German finds there three mowers.

The belt has been known as "Peter's staff," and in Smyth's "Cycle of Celestial Objects," published in England in 1844, some of the popular names are given, such as "Jacob's staff," possibly because of the traditional idea mentioned by Eusebius that Israel was an astrologer. Among the other names mentioned are "the golden yard of seamen," "the three kings of soothsayers," "the *ell and yard* of tradesmen," "the rake of husbandmen," and "Our Lady's wand of the Papists." In our own country, where the expression is in common use, we find in "The Wonders of the Heavens," by Duncan Bradford, Boston, 1837, the sword and belt of Orion again spoken of as the "yard and ell," with a short description.

Still earlier, E. H. Burritt, A. M., in his "Geography of the Heavens," published at Hartford, Conn., 1833, gives a more detailed description. He says: "Those four brilliant stars, in the form of a long square, or parallelogram, intersected in the middle by the 'three stars,' or *ell and yard*, form the outline of Orion." Again, in speaking of the stars in the belt, he says: "They are usually distinguished by the name of the 'three stars,' because there are no other stars in the heavens that exactly resemble them in position and brightness, etc., etc. The more common appellation for them, including those in the sword, is the *ell and yard*. They derive the latter name from the circumstance that the line which unites the three stars in the belt measures just three degrees in length, and is divided by the central star into two equal parts, like a yardstick, thus serving as a gradual standard for measuring the distances of stars from each other. There is a row of stars south of the belt, running obliquely, which form the sword. This row is called the *ell*, because it is once and a quarter the length of the yard or belt."

An effort to find, if possible, some knowledge or use of the expres-

sion "the ell and yard" outside of the Southern States has resulted in the discovery of a trace of it in a perverted form among the retired sea captains on Cape Cod, notably those who have spent most of their lives whaling.

One old captain, who I was told knew more of lunar observation than any man on the Cape, informed me he had never heard of the ell and yard, but knew all about the *yard and ell* (note my quotation from "The Wonders of the Heavens," Duncan Bradford). He explained that the three stars in the belt were called the yard because they resembled the yard-arm of a ship, but when joined with the stars in the sword they formed the letter L. Another form of expression that was given me was simply the letter L. From that version the yard had disappeared.

"But why," I have been asked, "do the negroes say 'de los' ell an' yard'?" It is possible that this is a poetic fancy. When "Johnny" can tell, by their position in the heavens, that it is near midnight, he does not say "de los' ell an' yard;" he sees them. It is in the corn-shucking song that they are lost.

Now the corn-shucking, in parts of the South, as the rice-gathering in others, was a festival season. It was made on one plantation, then on another, an all-night jollification, joined in by negroes on the neighboring plantations. During the night songs were sung, often accompanied by the notes of the banjo, or a crude form of shuffling dance; jokes were passed around, and refreshments liberally provided by the master. At this season of the year, the "ell and yard" at daybreak are just below the horizon. To the negro they are lost, "huntin' fer de mornin'," which threatens to appear before the corn is "in," or housed:—

Fer de los' ell an' yard is a huntin' fer de mornin',
En she 'll ketch up widdus fo' we ever git dis corn in.

We have already seen that the departed spirits the Greenlander sees in the belt have "lost their way." Orion, too, when his eyes were put out, was lost, and was obliged to have a guide to take him to the rising sun, whose rays were to restore his sight. Among the legends of Prajâpati we find that, as the God of Sacrifice, he disappeared for a time from among the gods, who knew not where he was. As Yajna, the year, he was lost when he went back in search of his daughter Rohini, and it is even hinted that the constellation itself disappeared from the heavens, and for a time was lost. How much, then, of the expression "de los' ell an' yard" can be claimed now as "genuine negro"?

An old negro woman in Maryland, when asked why she called the constellation the "hellnyard," replied, "My missus told me so."

Annie Weston Whitney.